NW INTERVIEW

¡TCHKUNG!

BY SILJA J.A. TALVI

The Great Insurrection

¡Tchkung!, on their latest album, *Incite*, describe their Post World Industries as a "subversive production facility located nowhere." But for all intents and purposes, ¡Tchkung!'s Post World Industries isn't completely without a home. Located behind a gas station on Seattle's Capitol Hill, cleverly tucked underground and without an address, the Post World office isn't the kind of place you'd stumble across accidentally.

Here, in a surprisingly spacious room packed with computers, equipment, files and an assortment of mismatched chairs, four members of the 15-member collective patiently wait for me to finally figure out which of the subterranean doors to walk through. Devon, the group's bespectacled female singer and fiddler, is joined by fellow vocalist Rick Wilson, bassist Reverend J. Sun and the fire-eating and breathing Tyson. In ¡Tchkung!, no one sticks to just one role; most members also play percussive instruments, assist with political research, and perform other assorted tasks.

As a self-managed collective, ¡Tchkung! have earned a well-deserved reputation in activist circles as a highly politicized, predictably loud and decidedly energetic group of artists and musicians who often bring their drums and voices to Northwest street demonstrations. To support ¡Tchkung! and to pay their bills, some of the members hold down jobs as homeless shelter workers and taxi drivers, while others travel the world to record music, to photograph and, as in the case of Grey Filastine and Reverend Lazlo Foo.bar, to learn percussion in countries as far away as India and Morocco.

Incite: A Soundtrack for Post World Insurrection, ¡Tchkung!'s third, full-length CD, continues in the vein of their two earlier releases: Packed with not-so-subtle political diatribes and social criticisms, ¡Tchkung!'s "post world" theme is its most dominant one. Unlike Busta Rhymes, who's busy predicting the coming apocalypse, the members of ¡Tchkung! are convinced that it has already taken place. In heavy, rhetoric-filled commentary dedicated to explaining the mission of the Post World Movement, ¡Tchkung!'s second album, *Post World Handbook*, announced that the apocalypse had "already happened and you missed it."

As such, ¡Tchkung! have busied themselves with the task of picking up little pieces and remnants of disintegrated fragments of culture, and, according to Wilson, reconstituting them into a "post-apocalyptic soup." "We're not following the traditional path of a world music band," says Wilson.

The traditional path of a world music band? I'm momentarily confused by this very proclamation. Although they may dabble in Middle Eastern rhythms and Australian instruments, how can ¡Tchkung! possibly try to group themselves with "world music?" And what on earth is the traditional path for a body of music that encompasses divergent tribes and cultures in Africa, Asia, Australia and other areas of the planet?

"The majority of what is represented as the folk music of the world tends to focus on sweet, happy natives all smiling and singing Third World happy melodies and it tends to focus on the Peter Gabriel path of attempting to honor and emulate.... Rather than try and copy, we completely reinvent," Wilson explains enthusiastically.

"We tend to combine a lot of disparate, different areas of culture," adds Tyson, who, despite his fire-breathing occupation, comes across as the most mild-mannered and humble member of the group. "We recombine [these aspects of culture] into our own vision of how we see things."

How ¡Tchkung! see things has been undeniably impacted by the fact that many of the collective's members grew up in Oklahoma, eventually moving to live on a three-acre squat somewhere in the wilderness, and developing their awareness as environmental and political activists. From solidarity work with the Chiapas, Mexico-based Zapatista rebels and the El Salvadoran leftist Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) party to playing anarchist and Earth First! conferences, ¡Tchkung! have evolved into a sort of musical representative for some newer generations of activists no longer content with, as Wilson puts it, "hum and strum music culture."

"With our generation...there are more and more urban kids, more people with a punk rock background that are becoming involved in political and activist issues." For these younger generations of activists, Rick explains, the folksy, guitar-strumming environmental/activist songs of the 1960s and '70s don't quite carry the same impact. But ¡Tchkung!'s music–loud, percussion-based, and heavily reliant on overt, politicized themes–may sit better with this audience.

¡Tchkung! took a new turn with *Incite* by mixing live recordings with digitally constructed tracks. "Some of the songs were built piece by piece on computers," Wilson says. "This album is by far the most do-it-yourself album we've [made]."

Just what constitutes "music" for ¡Tchkung! is also a matter up for debate: "Picture of the Riotzone" is made up of riot samples from Los Angeles, Miami and other locations in the U.S. For ¡Tchkung!, riots are a big point of interest and fascination. Through no apparent fault of their own, their 1994 performance at Bumbershoot ended with Seattle riot police dragging and macing attendees who had stayed on to dance and beat on drums. "It was so inappropriate," explains Devon. "It was mostly families, and there were little kids with their dads. All they had to do was put Barry Manilow over the P.A. and people would've left. It's the same thing with most demonstrations: If cops would just hang back and let people do their thing, it would be peaceful."

But ¡Tchkung!'s emphasis on nonviolent demonstration during our interview is contradictory at least in one respect: They make an annual habit of teaching the art of making and throwing Molotov cocktails to the attendees of Burning Man, a wild, free-form, multi-day, neo-tribal celebration that attracts thousands of participants to the Nevada desert each year. Creating an "ambient" environment of riot footage and air raid sirens, ¡Tchkung! have Burning Man participants throw the Molotovs at such amusing wooden cut-out figures as Ronald McDonald and the "Riot Cop."

Burning Man may be one thing but how, I wonder, are ¡Tchkung! received in a place like El Salvador, where the FMLN invited the group to perform in celebration of electoral victories?

"At Burning Man, the average person who throws a Molotov has never been in a real riot," explains Devon. "Where the average El Salvadoran... they've done it, they've lived through a real war. They are the real McCoy."

"Musically, a few times we got blank stares," admits Reverend J. Sun. "It took people a few songs to adjust and then they went bananas."

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